CHAPTER ONE

A CALL TO ACTION

MAINE'S STUDENT VOICES

"It was quite surprising how even the younger grade school kids were facing torment… . The responsible student seems to be the one getting tormented because he/she is smart or doesn't misbehave. This doesn't seem fair to anyone."

> Student interviewer, reflecting on her interview with a fifth grade student

"[Honesty is] being truthful with yourself, your family, friends and your society, also to be free from lying."

> Sixth grade student

"Respect is to honor or approve of others whether you like them or not."

> Sixth grade student

"They [teachers] send you to the office for really no reason at all, I think. They might have a perfectly good reason, but you don't understand their reason… ."

> Sixth grade student

"Children more times than not will do what they are shown and not what they are told."

> 16 year-old girl

"My entire life I have been surrounded by older people, my parents included, who say one thing and do another. Many kids of my generation have had even less guidance than me. Parents aren't doing their jobs, so schools should step in."
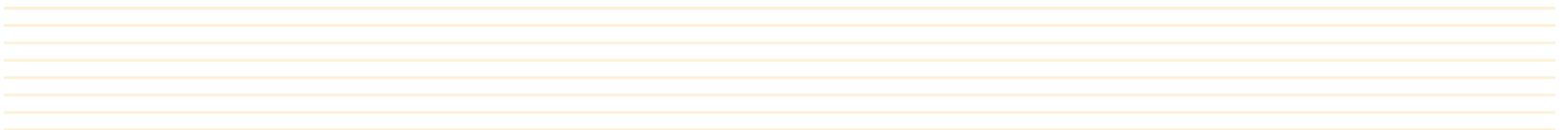
> 17 year-old girl

"All [the students I interviewed] felt well respected by peers, most not by teachers. Those who felt less respect from teachers seemed to be in lower phase classes."

> Student interviewer

"My generation and generations in the future need more role models. I think that if we had them we would not have half the problems we have."

> Student interviewer

"We must tell the positive stories, not just the negative ones. The problem is in society over-all; so kids look for 'purpose' even in negative ways, like in a group of students getting together to watch a fight between two students."

from May 22, 2000 student forum

"I think the only large issue that could be easily changed would be in the teacher/student relationship. At the higher levels [tracks] you often hear about teachers doing a good job listening to students. But at the lower levels that respect is lacking [and] I think that will compound any disrespect students have for each other by an authority figure showing that it is okay to behave in such a way. It is also more likely to cause students to be less respectful to the teacher."

High school sophomore

"If there were to be more diversity in the school system there would be less tension. Kids that are openly homosexual do get harassed. If there were more education about this issue, maybe there would not be so many problems with teasing and/or fights."

18 year- old Out Right member

"Some people stereotype me, especially teachers, that's just how they are. Most prejudice comes from teachers, but racism is present all around. I am afraid to express my opinion to authority figures."

High school freshman

"Families are so busy nowadays that they don't have much time to talk. I think that it is important for families to do things together, whether they watch TV or eat supper together. I would like to see more family values return to American culture."

High school sophomore

"Your mom and dad usually work to support your family, so you have four or five hours off to do whatever you want to do [when you are suspended].

Sixth grade student

"I feel sad for those without a strong family. I think little family mentorship leads to later social troubles."

High school senior

"This may sound harsh, but [as a teenager] you try to make yourself appear how you're supposed to be seen. It's like you're always two people because you're someone else inside."

16 year- old girl

"Too much competition destroys; it's about being better than others."

from May 22, 2000 student forum

"People are influenced greatly by what they're supposed to be."

High school senior

A CALL TO ACTION

Listen to student voices. Their message is clear. From these young people involved in the Commission's Student Interviewing Project, we learn:

- Even the youngest students have an understanding of what it means to be respectful, responsible, and honest. Even young children are faced with ethical dilemmas.

- While the focus of policy makers, school administrators, and society is often on problematic student behavior, the students' pointed comments should give all adults the incentive to reflect on their own actions or failures to act.

- Students view themselves as integral to the solution(s) to contemporary challenges confronting our schools.

- Students are concerned about the issue of respect, or lack thereof, for diversity. Students identified as issues of concern, sexism, racism, homophobia, and class discrimination.

- Students recognize, and are sad about, the changing structure of family.

The Student Interviewing Project involved a group of 37 middle and high school students who conducted 65 interviews of people of all ages throughout the State of Maine to inform the work of the Commission for Ethical and Responsible Student Behavior.

The anecdotal insights provided by the students who participated in the Student Interviewing Project are echoed by a large number of their peers throughout the state. The responses to a recently conducted survey of 40,000 Maine students statewide, in grades six through twelve, clearly indicate that Maine students would benefit from comprehensive and integrated efforts at fostering ethical and responsible behavior. When students were given the opportunity to "voice their perceptions of several factors contributing to the total learning environment," the *Students Speak* survey found:

- 47% of students claim to have been threatened either verbally or physically at school.

- 31% of students disagree with the statement, "I am proud of my school."

- 25% of students believe teachers do not care about their problems or feelings.

- 46% of students disagree with the statement, "Students show respect for each other."

- 20% of students disagree with the statement, "I feel safe at school."

- Nearly 50% of students claim that other students say insulting or hurtful things to them.

- 40% of students disagree with the statement, "School rules are enforced fairly."

- 20% of students do not believe that teachers respect their thoughts or value their opinions.

- 45% of students disagree with the statement, "Students show respect for teachers."

- 35% of students claim to have difficulty learning due to the disruptive behavior of other students.

    -University of Maine College of Education and Human Development (2000).

Maine students in the elementary grades report that they are frequently teased and bullied. About 40% of Maine third-graders say that they had been called hurtful names at least monthly or more frequently. A similar number report being hit, kicked or pushed at least monthly. (Maine Project Against Bullying). For some students, harassment worsens as they get older. For example, gay, lesbian and bisexual youths experience pervasive victimization both verbally and physically. (Maine Children's Alliance: 24).

The student voices are compelling. They point to a need for transformation in our schools. And these voices are not alone; the voices of Maine teachers, parents and other citizens also call for a more explicit reflection of the community's core values in the daily operation of our schools. Student voices and action are critical to achieving the sort of change called for in this report. As we describe in the following chapters, long term systemic change will require collaborative effort from all who matter in the lives of students and the culture of schools. Not one person in our society can afford to overlook this opportunity to ensure that each school and student operates

within a culture that promotes, even demands, ethical and responsible behavior. We all have a role to play in seeking solutions to the problems illustrated by the preceding data.

Maine Values

Maine is a unique and vital community. Underpinning this community has always been a profound sense of values. Civility, common-sense, frugality, generosity, humility, responsibility, independence, integrity—these and other values are so important to our basic character that, though they have defined us in the eyes of the world, we scarcely ever remark upon them. In Maine, a handshake can still seal a deal. We have felt secure in our distinctive Maine community when other communities have seemed beset by the untrustworthy, the chaotic, and the unsafe.

Our values have made Maine a truly special place to live and raise a family. We take comfort in knowing Maine is one of the safest states in the country. Above all, we value our children. In 1999, Maine was named the best state in which to raise a child and was recognized as the top educational system in America.

Although Maine is still one of the safest places in America, teachers and students in our schools are telling us in increasing numbers that irresponsible, disrespectful or violent behavior threatens their sense of personal safety or undermines their ability to teach and to learn. National trends that we have, until recently, watched from a distance are now here in Maine: youth violence and vandalism, bomb threats, studies indicating that many young people don't view cheating as wrong, lack of respect for authority, bullying, an increase in hate crimes and bigotry, use of foul language, and self-destructive behaviors such as substance abuse and suicide.

Some of our youth are making bad decisions. They either lack basic values or fail to apply them. Although these negative behaviors are the exceptions, even a few such bad decisions severely disrupt our schools. In the face of such challenges, too often we grapple with how to punish misbehavior, while ignoring the issue of how to prevent it.

One-third of surveyed Maine residents believe the biggest problem facing today's teenagers is declining moral and/or social values—double the number identifying any other problem.

Nearly 40% of surveyed Maine residents believe the most important issue in education today is teaching children values and discipline—double the number naming any other issue.

Over 60% of surveyed Maine residents believe that public schools should play a very important or critical role in teaching children ethical and responsible behavior.

-Strategic Marketing Services (1999)

Our schools must prepare students for academic and professional success, but they also must prepare students for life. Graduating students must be able to live constructively in society, to deal with frustrations and challenges, to communicate, to coexist, to care, and to make tough decisions about what is right or wrong. Few would agree that our schools have succeeded if they produce students with academic knowledge but without the ability or the will to be responsible and ethical adults.

The need for action grows more urgent as the consequences of unethical behavior become more immediate, far-reaching, and devastating. Today, we witness irresponsible or unethical actions on a grand scale, from nuclear accidents to computer viruses to environmental degradation to deadly violence in our schools. Today, more powerful and personalized technology can yield greater devastation from a single unethical act.

All this lends urgency to our efforts to help both youth and adults in our schools achieve high expectations for responsible behavior and attitudes. Although we cannot control the influences of the media and our broader culture, when our schools and communities actively commit to address the lack of values and decision-making skills that underlies bad behavior, it works. Schools can increase achievement and attendance, improve attitudes and motivation, and reduce disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and disruptive behavior, and can produce citizens who are better equipped to resolve the tough ethical choices that life will present.

CALL TO ACTION

MAINE VALUES

The challenge we address has many causes but only one path to a solution. All of us—students, educators, parents, and communities—must take responsibility in order to make change. Our schools are on the front lines, but they cannot do it alone. Only in partnership with parents and community—and, most importantly, with the students themselves—can our schools meet the challenge.

Some may ask, "Whose values will we teach?" The answer, we believe, is simple: "Maine's." Our personal values may be deeply rooted in our unique experiences, but we share a common core. For our communities, for the larger Maine community, and indeed for practically every community around the world, there is a core of ethical values that is basic to its society. Together we can identify those core elements of character without which our civility and our society cannot sustain themselves.

"By values we typically mean, as the Oxford English Dictionary confirms, those qualities that are 'worthy of esteem for [their] own sake' or have 'intrinsic worth.' Used by itself... the word usually suggests moral values, where moral... pertains to whatever is right, proper and good."
-Kidder (1994:322)

It is not enough for us to assume our common values—we must identify them, talk about them, and nurture them. Communities must set expectations and define core values. Schools must be empowered to teach, reinforce and nurture students in these basic values. Adults must model attitudes and behaviors that reflect those values. Students must hold themselves and their peers to high expectations, and be equipped with the skills to use these values to make good choices.

We have already taken the most important step: we have begun. The Maine Legislature has called for the development of "statewide standards for responsible and ethical student behavior." The task of this Commission is to define those standards.

The Maine Legislature has also called for every community in Maine to translate these standards into their own codes of conduct. This work must happen in every community with the involvement of large numbers of citizens, students, and educators using these standards to create codes of conduct embodying both their shared expectations for attitudes and behavior, and the consequences of violating those expectations. Although we do not in this report attempt to outline the details of a model code of conduct, our work is intended to help define the goals and strategies for this difficult and important next step, to be taken by citizens all over Maine.

We are confident that Maine people are prepared to address this problem squarely and undertake the hard work of comprehensive education and prevention. Fortunately, this problem is a challenge, not yet a crisis. Our strong communities give us a head start. Many promising initiatives are already underway. Many great tools are at hand. We hope this report provides a guide for their use.

Statewide Standards for Behavior

"In consultation with organizations representing school boards, school administrators, teachers, parents and other interested local officials and community members, the commissioner shall develop statewide standards for responsible and ethical student behavior."

-enacted Public Law 1999, Chapter 351

Local Codes of Conduct

"With input from educators, administrators, parents, students and community members, each school board shall adopt a district-wide student code of conduct consistent with the statewide standards for student behavior developed under section 254, subsection 11. The student code of conduct must:

A. Define unacceptable student behavior;

B. Establish standards of student responsibility for behavior;

C. Prescribe consequences for violation of the student code of conduct, including first-time violations, when appropriate;

D. Describe appropriate procedures for referring students in need of special services to those services;

E. Establish criteria to determine when further assessment of a current individual education plan is necessary, based on removal of the student from class;

F. Establish policies and procedures concerning the removal of disruptive or violent students from a classroom or a school bus, as well as student disciplinary and placement decisions, when appropriate; and

G. Establish guidelines and criteria concerning the appropriate circumstances when the superintendent or the superintendent's designee may provide information to the local police or other appropriate law enforcement authorities regarding an offense that involves violence committed by any person on school grounds or other school property.

The school board is responsible for ensuring that school officials inform students, parents, and community members of the student code of conduct."

-Maine Statutes, Title 20-A, Section 1001(15): Adoption of student code of conduct (enacted Public Law 1999, Chapter 351)

CALL TO ACTION

An Approach for Maine

Our path to a solution builds on the best of Maine and borrows from the best around the country and the world. We are certainly not the first state or community to grapple with the challenges of student behavior within a framework of values and ethics. For several years, a renewed focus on this approach—frequently referred to as character education—has been gathering momentum around the country. We believe that in Maine we have an opportunity to succeed in this effort in unsurpassed ways, if we are able to commit to solutions that are subtle and systemic rather than simplistic, and lasting rather than superficial in their outcomes.

Two central points about our approach:

First, our approach describes a long-term process of change in attitudes, structures, and climate in our schools and communities. Changing school structure and culture is a tremendous task that undoubtedly will take a long time fully to achieve. However, we believe that the changes we describe can have an immediate positive impact on how our schools look and feel and what happens there. Schools should expect and strive for some recognizable results now, even if—realistically—it may take time for this positive improvement to predominate. Success here is about community, consistency, and communication; these are features that do not change overnight and that need constant reaffirmation.

Second, our approach emphasizes expectations and education, not simply strengthening the rigor of conventional punishments and discipline. Concrete consequences and discipline have an essential role in teaching and maintaining responsible behavior. Immediate intervention is the first step in preventing the continuation of unacceptable behavior. Safety of students and others must, of course, be addressed as the top priority whenever the need for intervention arises. We must, however, begin to think about what happens prior to the point at which an intervention is necessary, and after an intervention occurs if we are to achieve positive, long-term change in behaviors and attitudes. The disciplinary process itself must teach students to make better choices. It should not be an exercise in humiliation, hurt, or exclusion. Thus we address discipline as an important component in creating an ethical and responsible school culture—but we do not begin with it.

We believe a successful approach for Maine:

- **Must be grounded in our history and our community.**

- **Must hear the voices of our students.**

- **Must be based in Maine's *Learning Results.***

- **Must address the whole climate, and the systemic and structural issues in our schools and communities.**

- **Must empower educators, parents, community members, and especially students to expect, teach, model and enforce ethical and responsible behavior and build on what is already working.**

- **Must be measured and evaluated.**

Must be grounded in our history and our community.

Members of the Commission have tried to practice what we preach. At the state level, we have used creative means to include the voices of Maine citizens, including students, as an essential component of identifying community core values, setting standards and promoting ethical and responsible student behavior. At the community level, if the process of value identification is to be meaningful and the practice of standard–setting is to be effective, these values and standards must reflect the concerns and ideals of our citizens. This is not just an issue of "local control," it is an issue of local ownership and support for the desired outcomes. This focus on community involvement and the use of identified core values to inform practice is a departure from past approaches to fostering ethical and responsible student behavior.

Must hear the voices of our students.

We think it regrettable that this self-evident concept is still viewed as a radical one in some quarters. Students know their own behavior and that of their peers, and what drives it. Students have many powerful and surprising (to adults) things to say about what works, what doesn't, and how they can work as partners with adults to make change happen. The Commission developed the Student Interviewing Project, and relied on students as researchers and editors. We hope this example will inspire parallel efforts in schools and communities.

Must be based in Maine's *Learning Results.*

Maine's *Learning Results* sets standards for what students should know and what they should be able to do. *Learning Results* describes the student outcomes towards which all our educators and schools are working, but does not dictate the means or methods for achieving them. The standards for ethical and responsible behavior set forth here are intended to apply to and, elaborate on, the Guiding Principles of the *Learning Results*, and to complement the academic standards described in that document. Our mission is to set a context of values, provide students with content knowledge, build appropriate attitudes and teach students specific skills necessary to the development and exercise of good judgement and responsible behavior.

Must address the whole climate, and the systemic and structural issues in our schools and communities.

Any effort at instilling a sense of ethics and responsibility in our students must focus intensely on behavior, including the prevention and correction of harmful or unethical behavior. The focus, however, cannot be solely on student behavior. If parents, educators, and communities hope to foster ethical and responsible student behavior, systemic changes in the structures of our schools, in adult behavior and in the community are also required. We have attempted to describe, in Chapter Two, the positive attributes that can result from a willingness to address the needs of the school culture at a structural level. Although our focus here is grades K-12, these

systemic changes overlap significantly with the recommendations of *Promising Futures* (1998), the report of the Commission on Secondary Education.

Must empower educators, parents, community members, and students to expect, teach, model and enforce ethical and responsible behavior and build on what is already working.

Changing climate and culture require that expectations for responsibility be communicated, and that interventions be made whenever, wherever, and by whoever is on the scene—including a student's peers. All involved need to be empowered and supported so that it is clear that intervention is appropriate and desirable. The current uncertainty and reluctance about roles, where many adults and students feel they are going out on a limb or taking an isolated stance, must be reversed. There is a tendency to focus corrective efforts on reduction of the worst incidents of bad behavior, and our recommendations will lead to such a reduction. However, the approach we have taken is not purely punitive, nor is it about "troublemakers" or "at-risk" children or youth. We address the needs of all students—and the corresponding positive roles that all adults can play in their interactions with students.

Many positive initiatives are already underway that can provide the vehicle for such empowerment: for example, The Children's Cabinet, Maine's Promise, Civil Rights Teams, mentoring, public health prevention efforts, parent involvement, conflict resolution and peer mediation, service learning, and restorative justice programs.

Must be measured and evaluated.

In order to sustain systemic changes and improved student behavior, there must be a mechanism to evaluate and measure desired outcomes. These evaluations must go beyond simple measures of the most negative student behaviors (e.g., the number of bomb threats) to include measures of the positive values, attitudes, and skills demonstrated by members of the school community. Evaluation is critical to the continued improvement and sustainability of an ethical and responsible school culture.

CALL TO ACTION

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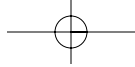
NAVIGATING THE REPORT

The following sections of our report explain the connection between our mission and Maine's *Learning Results*. We provide a guide to the visible characteristics or Hallmarks, that reflect a school and community committed to a culture of ethics and responsibility. This report also focuses on the process that must involve a whole community to ensure success. We provide core values and standards—values that should be adapted and customized by each community. We also offer concrete examples of practices that illustrate compelling efforts by real Maine schools to wrestle with the expectations presented in this report.